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2010

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Recommended Citation

Brabec, Elizabeth and Molnarova, Kristina, "Pluzina: the issues of documenting a vernacular landscape" (2010). *Landscape Architecture & Regional Planning Faculty Publication Series*. 61.

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May 2010

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Pluzina: The issues of documenting a vernacular landscape

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From the Proceedings of

LANDSCAPE LEGACY: Landscape Architecture between Art and Science,
a joint conference of
the International Study Group on the Multiple Use of Lands (ISOMUL)
and
the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture,
Maastricht, Netherlands, May 12-14.

Abstract

This paper studies the remnants of medieval pluzina, a historical Central European field pattern dating to the 13th or 14th century A.D. In medieval Czech, pluzina meant the crop fields, meadows, pastures and roads belonging to one village. Today, pluzinas are visible as patterns of long, narrow fields defined by hedgerows. Due to the hedgerows make the pattern visible, pluzinas are attractive parts of farming landscapes, similar to bocage landscapes found in Northern England, Scotland or Brittany.

During the last 150 years, the majority of these landscape structures have vanished, owing either to the intensification of agriculture, or abandonment to reforestation. As the first comprehensive study of pluzinas in the Czech Republic is being completed, the question of the actual age of the hedgerows in this medieval landscape has come to the fore. It is unclear whether the hedgerows (as opposed to the field pattern) are actually of medieval origin, and whether it is even possible to determine (under economic constraints) the original date of this landscape feature. Since the answers to these questions are not clearly supported by either archaeological or documentary evidence, is it even necessary to conclusively date this landscape feature to assign historical or cultural landscape value?

These are the questions that have emerged as researchers struggle to justify the critical importance of this landscape feature. Although we know that the ownership and land cultivation patterns are of medieval origin, accurately dating the hedgerows is much more challenging. The importance of this unique landscape is critical as the form and landscape pattern has continued to disappear; 71% of the hedgerows were lost during the socialist period between 1950 and 2005, and those losses are further compounded with losses under post-socialist ownership land consolidation efforts.

This paper will discuss an approach for defining the critical features of historic and culturally vernacular landscapes that accepts the vagaries of vegetative features, features which cannot be conclusively dated to the stated period of landscape significance. We will illustrate the differences in European and US approaches to quantifying historic vernacular resources by applying the various regimes for European and American documentation and analysis (US Secretary of the Interior Standards; European Union standards; UNESCO standards for World Heritage designation). The questions of historical integrity and significance are critical, particularly as policies for the legal protection of pluzina landscapes and the methodological guidelines for management are developed.

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